DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 900 UD 035 510

TITLE	Demanding Quality Public Education in Tough Economic Times: What Voters Want from Elected Leaders.
INSTITUTION	Public Education Network, Washington, DC.; Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	19p.; For 2002 survey, see ED 464 190.
AVAILABLE FROM	Public Education Network, 601 Thirteenth Street, N.W., Suite 900 North, Washington, DC 20005-3808. Tel: 202-628-7460; Fax: 202-628-1893; Web site: http://PublicEducation.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Achievement; *Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Minority Groups; Politics of Education; *Public Education; *Public Opinion; Voting
IDENTIFIERS	Elected Positions

ABSTRACT

This report presents data from a January 2003 national public opinion poll that examined what voting-age Americans valued about public education and wanted their elected leaders to do to raise academic achievement for all children. It analyzes data on 800 voters with an oversample of 125 registered African Americans and 125 registered Latino voters, also including information from focus groups with African Americans, Latinos, and whites, with and without children. Results indicate that education remains a top priority for voters despite concerns over conflict with Iraq, the threat of international terrorism, rising medical insurance costs, and growing unemployment. Republicans and Democrats alike rated education above health care, national security, Social Security, and job creation. All voters, regardless of party affiliation, age, race, and other demographic characteristics, offered significantly more support for tax increases if the additional revenue was earmarked for education. The public supported the No Child Left Behind Act and its effort to improve education. Voters recognized that quality education requires adequate resources and wanted their state legislators to take an active role in ensuring that sufficient funds are available to schools. Respondents believed that teachers are the key to improving school performance, and there must be improvement in their pay, prestige, power, and preparation. (SM)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 473 900

2003 NATIONAL SURVEY OF PUBLIC OPINION

Demanding Quality Public Education In Tough Economic Times

WHAT VOTERS WANT FROM ELECTED LEADERS

PUBLIC EDUCATION NETWORK

Public Involvement • Public Education • Public Benefit

EDUCATION WEEK
American Education's Newspaper of Record

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

R. CAREAGA
PUBLIC EDUCATION NETWORK

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

UD 035 510

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Demanding Quality Public Education In Tough Economic Times

WHAT VOTERS WANT FROM ELECTED LEADERS

Public Education Network (PEN) is a national organization of local education funds (LEFs) and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities across the nation. PEN and its 78 LEF members work in 30 states and the District of Columbia on behalf of 10.6 million children in more than 1,200 school districts, seeking to bring the community voice into the debate on quality public education in the firm belief that an active, vocal constituency will ensure every child, in every community, a quality public education.

Education Week is the newspaper of record for American precollegiate education. Produced by the nonprofit Editorial Projects in Education, based in Bethesda, MD, this independent newspaper is now in its 22nd publishing year. *Education Week* is well known for its annual *Quality Counts* report on the state of school reform in the 50 states, as well as for its award-winning coverage of news in the nation's public and private schools.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Poll Findings

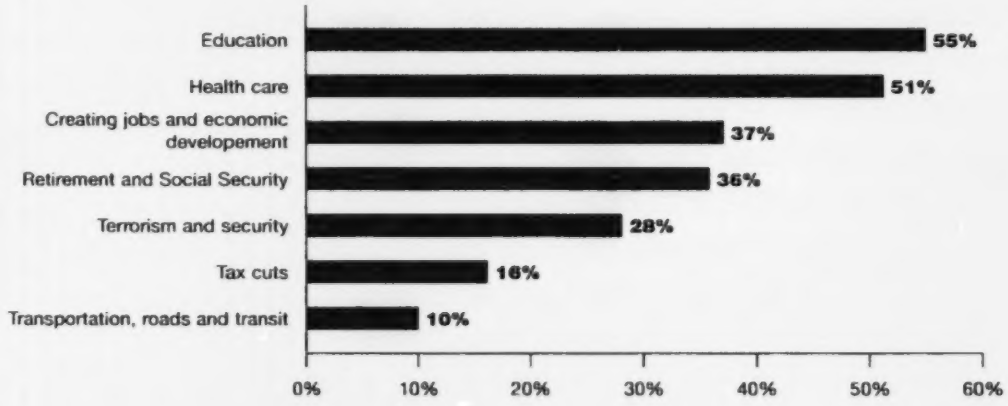
"In tough economic times and amid global uncertainty, voters are saying loud and clear that education is a core value for all Americans. Voters view education as an essential service, and they will no longer need the services of lawmakers who jeopardize what matters most."

-Wendy D. Puriefoy, president of Public Education Network

Four years ago, Public Education Network launched an annual public opinion survey that focuses on defining what Americans value about public education and what voters want their elected leaders to do to raise achievement for all children. This effort, conducted in partnership with *Education Week* since 2001, has consistently demonstrated that quality public education remains a core American value even at a time of increased threats to our national security and at a time of deep budget crises in all states.

The results of this year's survey demonstrate that education remains a top priority for voters despite concerns over a conflict with Iraq, the threat of international terrorism, rising medical insurance costs, and growing unemployment. Republicans and Democrats alike rated education above health care, national security, Social Security, and job creation. And even those who have serious misgivings about the newly implemented No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) consider education the most important issue our nation faces today.

Top National Priorities



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"This report shows what Americans want their elected officials to do to guarantee all students access to a high-quality public education. The public won't get sidetracked by politics, war, or pressure to balance budgets when it comes to protecting education."

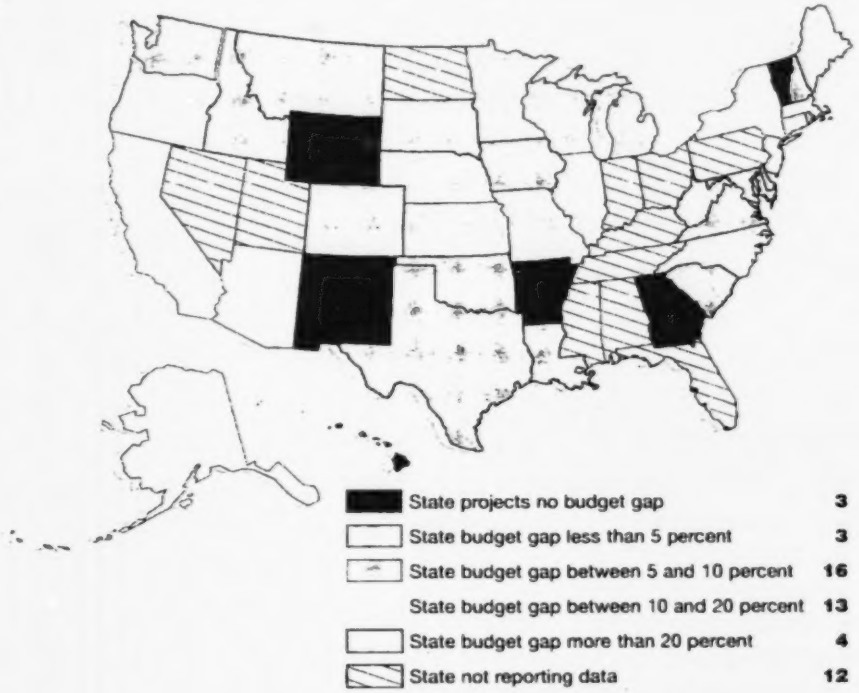
—Virginia B. Edwards, editor and publisher of *Education Week*

All segments of society—old and young, Democrats and Republicans, parents and non-parents—recognize the key role that education plays in building healthy communities, creating good jobs, and securing a promising future for our children and our nation.

Education and State Budget Shortfalls

This year, standing by this commitment will be more challenging than ever as states address the worst budget crisis they have experienced in half a century. The most recent budget projections from the National Conference of State Legislatures for fiscal year 2004 are grim. Only six states report no budget gap or a gap of less than five percent. Most states will face shortfalls between five and 10 percent. And some states will contend with gaps greater than 20 percent.

FY 2004 State Budget Gaps


State projects no budget gap 3
State budget gap less than 5 percent 3
State budget gap between 5 and 10 percent 16
State budget gap between 10 and 20 percent 13
State budget gap more than 20 percent 4
State not reporting data 12

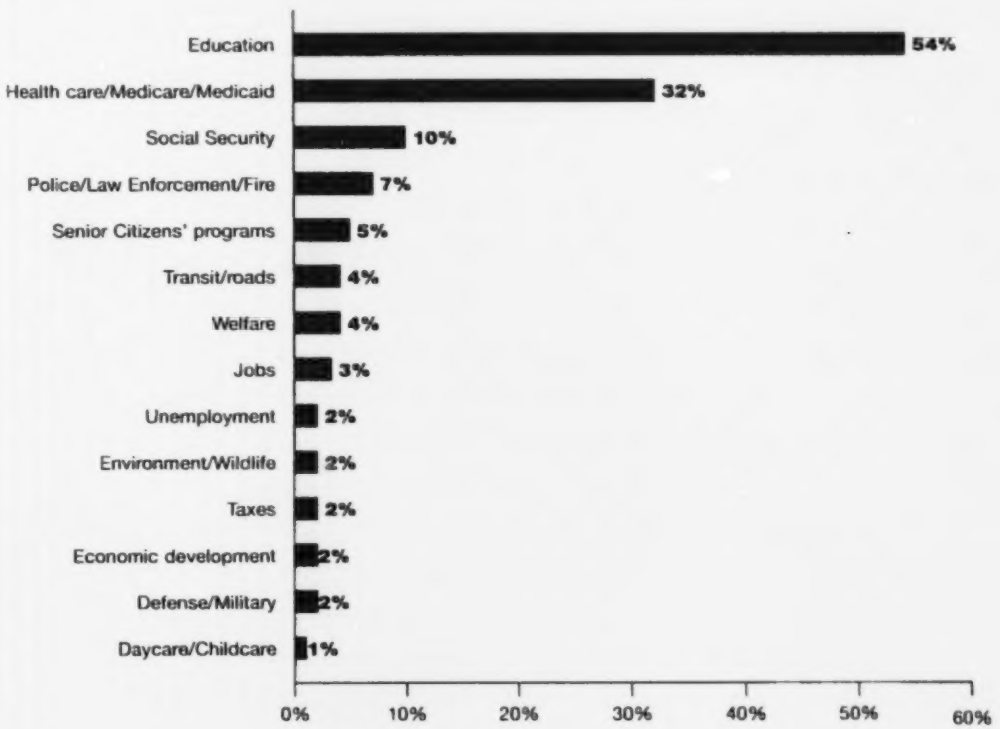
source: National Conference of State Legislatures
State Budget Update: February 2003

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

In this tight budget climate, Americans are deeply concerned about state budget cuts and the impact these cuts will have on their communities. The vast majority of Americans (90 percent) believe that their state is facing a budget deficit, and more than half (58 percent) believe that their state is contending with a serious deficit. Most Americans (65 percent) believe that budget cuts are already having a serious or somewhat serious impact on their community.

Recognizing the need for austerity, voters still want to protect education. When voters were asked an open-ended question about which one or two items they want to see protected from state budget cuts, education tops their list of priorities. Indeed, support for education funding (54 percent) outdistances every other spending category, including important items such as health care (32 percent), retirement security (10 percent), and law enforcement/fire protection (7 percent). In fact, education is the only area that a clear majority of respondents want to see protected.

Budget Areas the Public Wants Recession-Proof

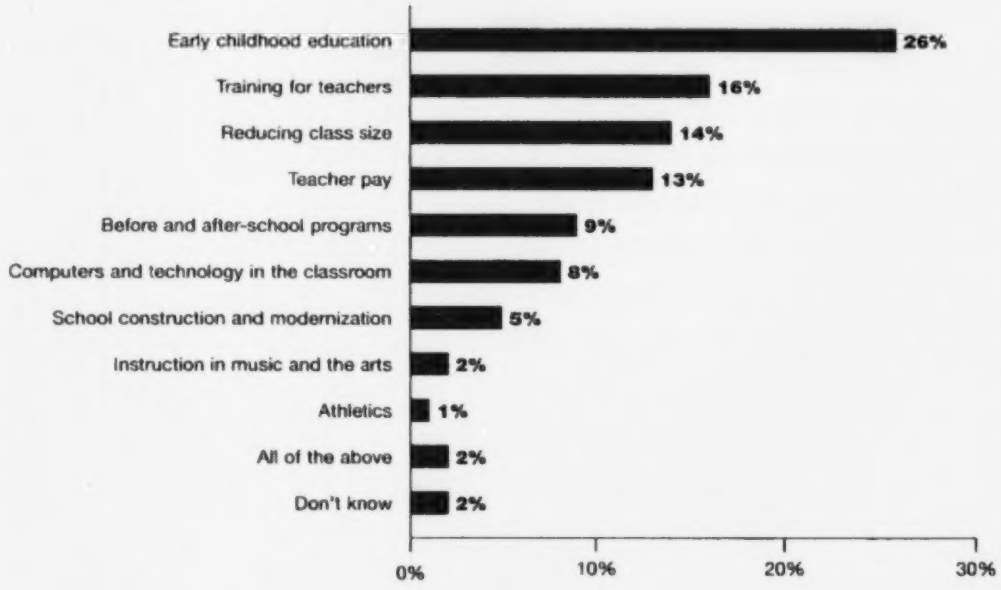


"The things that are needed to carry out a good education system do not come free. And the price of services is getting more and more expensive.... Budgets need to be protected."

White focus group participant

Three-fourths of voters believe that education programs in their states will be seriously or somewhat affected by budget cuts. Voters say they particularly want to see teacher salaries, teacher preparation and professional development, early childhood education, and class size protected from cuts in education spending.

Education Budget Priorities the Public Wants Recession-Proof

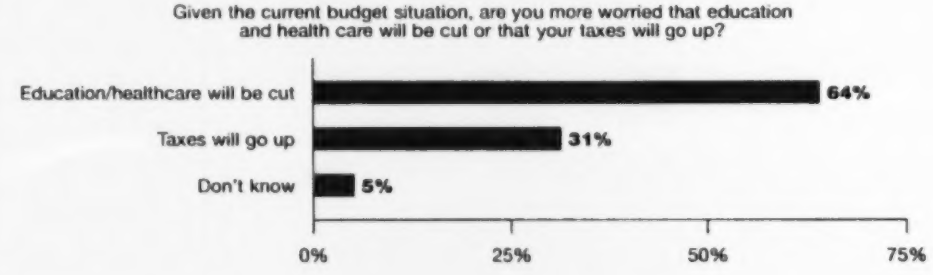


BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"The poll tells us that it's time for a new discussion on the role tax policy plays in supporting quality public education. Thinking the good times would last forever, states and the federal government have cut taxes at the expense of quality education and young people. Now too many of our most disadvantaged young people will be paying the price—expected to know and do more, but without the extra help necessary." —**Wendy D. Puriefoy, president of Public Education Network**

By a two-to-one margin voters say they are more concerned about cuts in services (such as education and health care) than tax increases. Even a majority of Republicans share this concern. And voters say they would be willing to introduce new taxes if that money is put into a special trust earmarked only for education. All voters regardless of party affiliation, age, race and other demographic categories offer significantly more support for tax increases if the additional revenue is earmarked for education.

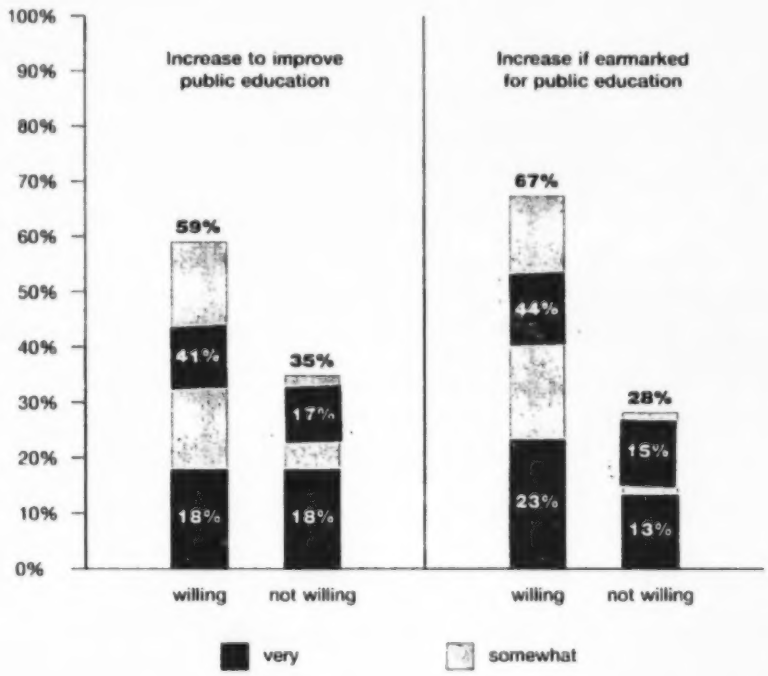
Concerns about Taxes and Services



"If there was some way that they could say, 'Okay, we are going to raise taxes, but this percentage is going straight to schools' and they could ensure it would go to the schools, then I would agree on that." —**Latino focus group participant**

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Willingness To Increase Taxes



No Child Left Behind (NCLB): Public Support, Unfunded Mandate

The public supports the No Child Left Behind Act and its efforts to improve teacher quality, close achievement gaps among students from different backgrounds, introduce annual testing in reading and math, and improve low-performing schools. While only 56 percent of voters say they have heard of the law, after being informed about its provisions, 71 percent of voters favor NCLB, while only 14 percent are opposed.

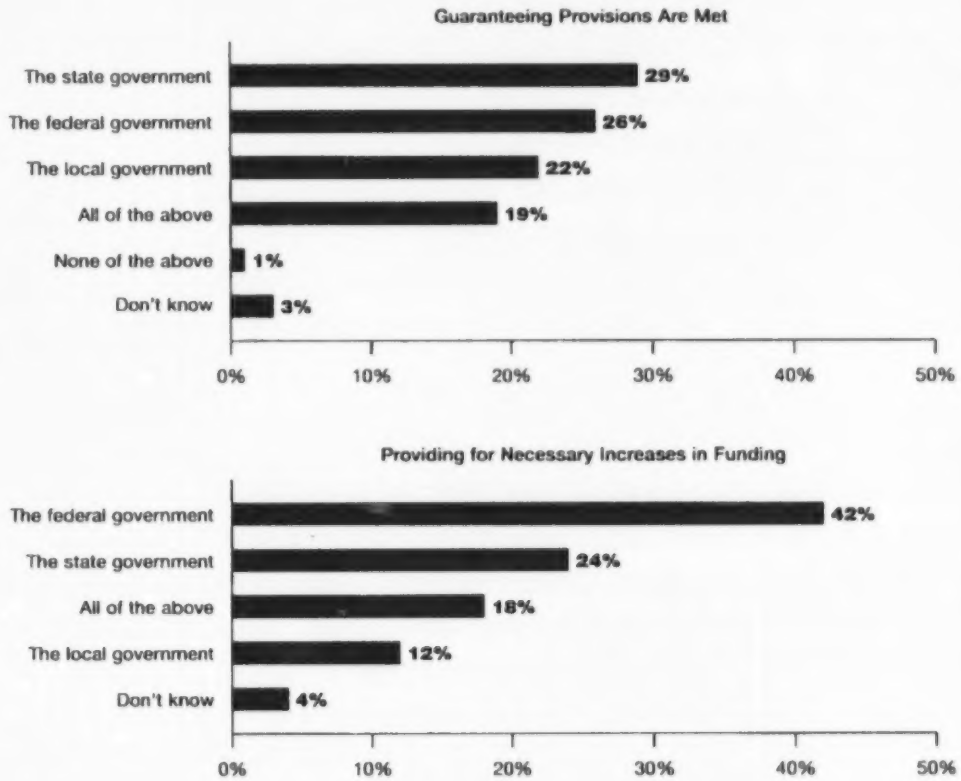
Voters believe that responsibility for ensuring that the law's provisions are met by all school districts should be shared relatively equally between the state, federal, and local government. But most voters see NCLB as an unfunded mandate. Three-fourths of voters (75 percent) recognize that more money may be required to meet the law's objectives. They believe that the federal government (42 percent)—not the states (24 percent) or local school districts (12 percent)—should take the lead in ensuring that schools have the necessary resources to implement the law.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"I think it's outrageous that someone can sit in Congress and say, you in Mississippi, we're going to close your school, but we're not going to give you money to help it be better even though you really tried."

White focus group participant

Responsibility for Implementing and Paying for No Child Left Behind



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"Every Congressman has that responsibility—to make sure the policies are right for good education, the regulations are right... To make sure there is enough federal money..."

-African-American focus group participant

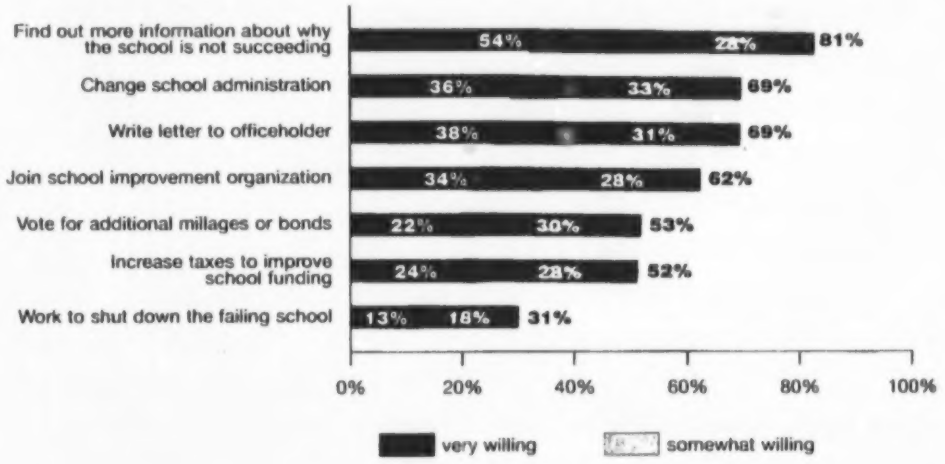
Moreover, voters are so strongly focused on holding the federal government to its responsibility to fund NCLB that they would vote against their U.S. senator or representative by a nearly 2-to-1 margin if the officeholder refused to back sufficient funding for the law's implementation.

The Problem of Low Performing Schools

Voters believe that lack of parental involvement (22 percent), poor management (15 percent), misuse of resources (15 percent), and shortages of resources (15 percent) are the leading factors that contribute to low performance of schools. They disagree with the notion that schools fail because of unqualified teachers (9 percent), the poverty of their students (4 percent), poor curriculum (2 percent), or old school buildings (1 percent).

Respondents were asked what they would be willing to do if a school in their community were designated as failing. More than eight in 10 voters (81 percent) said they would be very or somewhat willing to find out more information about why the school is not succeeding. More than two-thirds of voters (69 percent) would work to change the administration of the failing school or write a letter to an officeholder indicating their concerns. On the other hand, most voters (65 percent) are unwilling to shut down a failing school in their community.

Public Actions for Low Performing Schools

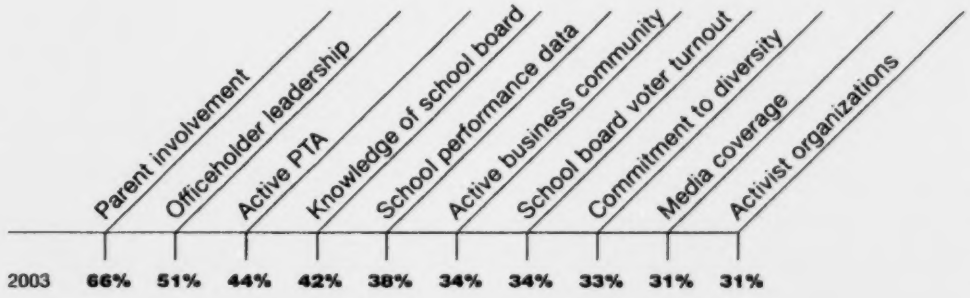


BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A New "Civic Index"

The poll presents, for the first time, the elements of a new "civic index" that citizens can use to determine how well their local community supports public education. While previous polls have indicated that Americans believe parents should be more involved in their children's learning, this poll indicates that parental involvement is the most important indicator of strong community support for public education. Respondents cite strong leadership from officeholders as the second most important indicator that a community takes responsibility for improving public education. This index will be updated annually and future information will explore actual participation in these areas.

Creating a Civic Index for Strong Public Education



Percentage of Americans who believe the above indicators are most important for determining community responsibility

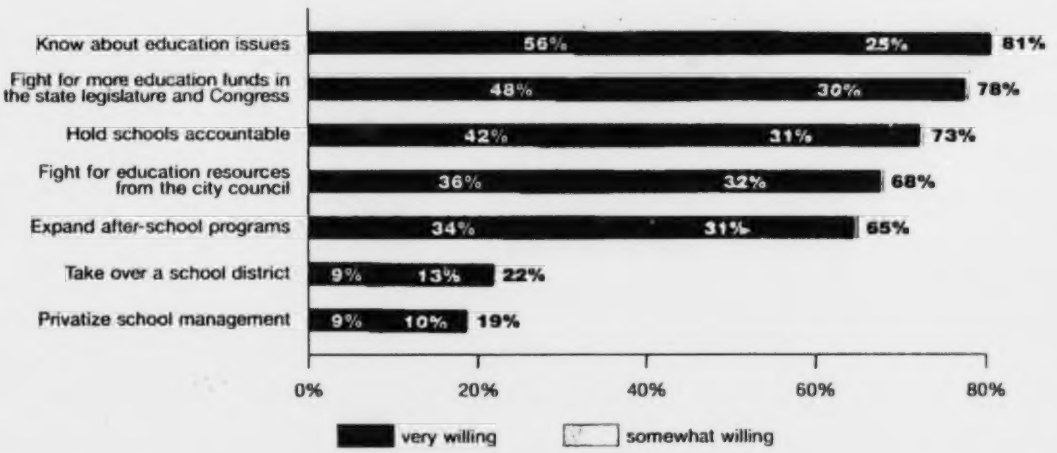
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

What the Public Wants Elected Officials To Do for Public Education

In this new era of standards and accountability, the public wants elected officials at all levels of government—not just educators and students—to be involved in and held accountable for achieving better results in education.

In a year when hundreds of mayoral elections will be held, virtually every candidate will make claims that he or she will be the "education mayor." Voters believe that mayors and county supervisors should only be allowed to claim that mantle if they demonstrate real knowledge of education issues (56 percent), fight for more education funds from the U.S. Congress and the state legislature (48 percent), and hold schools accountable for their performance (42 percent). By contrast, voters do not support mayors who would take over school districts (9 percent) or give their schools over to private management (9 percent).

What Local Elected Officials Should Do



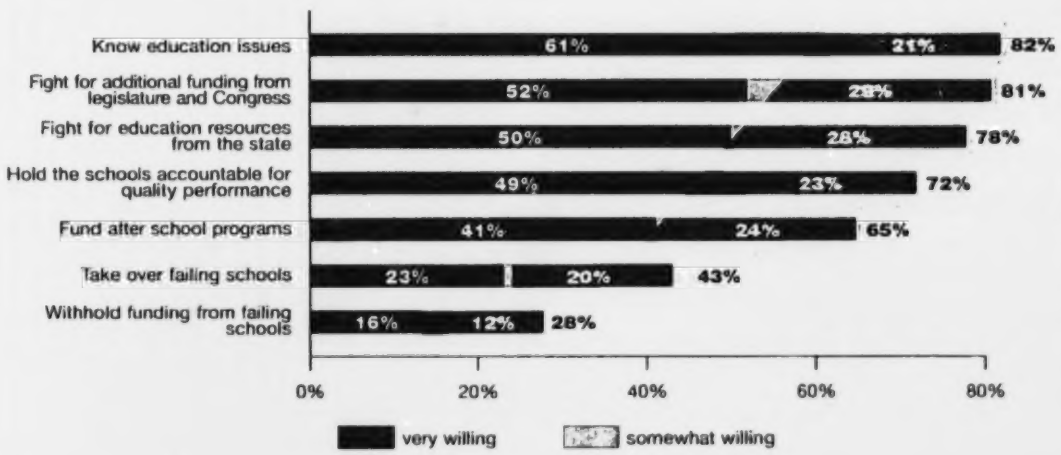
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"I want my elected officials to keep their word. Do what [they] say [they] are going to do. Fund the schools and pay teachers more." —Latino focus group participant

Voters recognize that quality education requires adequate resources. An overwhelming majority of voters (90 percent) want their state legislators to take an active role in ensuring that sufficient resources are available to schools. The issue of greatest concern among voters is their state legislators' knowledge of education issues (61 percent), followed by their legislators' willingness to fight for more education funds from Washington (52 percent) and willingness to demand more education resources from the state government (50 percent).

Voters also expressed significant support for state legislators who seek to hold schools accountable (49 percent) and seek funding for after school programs (41 percent). On the other hand, the public is much less supportive of legislators who advocate for state takeovers of failing schools (23 percent) and who withhold funding from failing schools (16 percent). These results underscore the public's support for initiatives that target additional funds to low-performing schools rather than penalizing them for poor performance.

What State Elected Officials Should Do



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

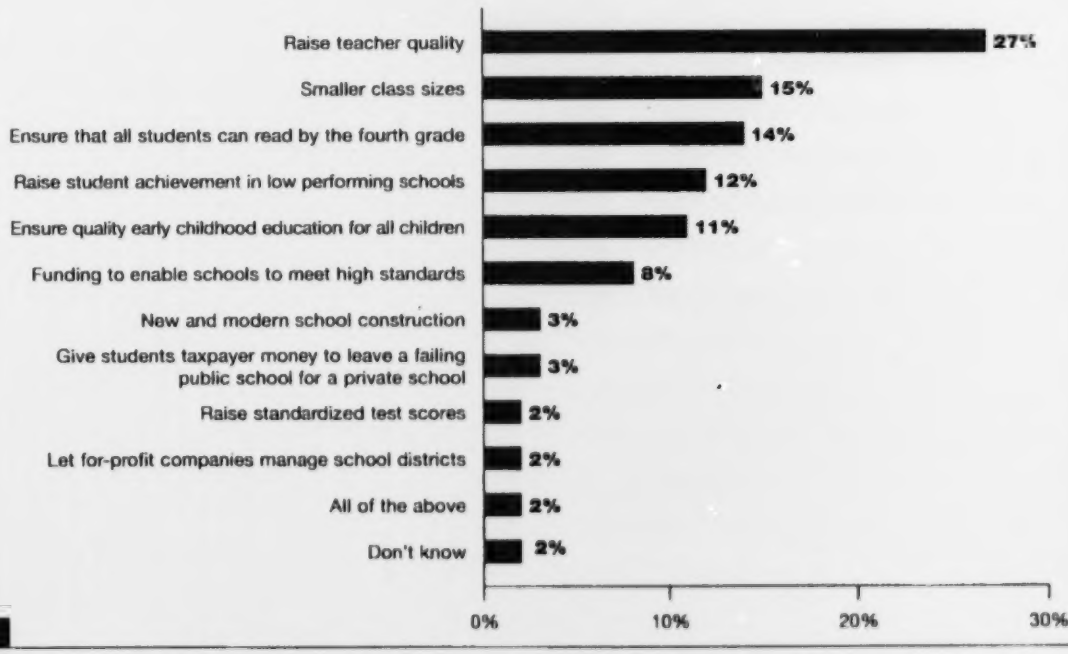
"If they just whack the budget, they are going to get whacked a year from now by concerned citizens who really see education as a priority." **White focus group participant**

Most voters (59 percent) say that a candidate's stand on education is either the most important factor or a very important factor in how they cast their votes in November. Respondents say they would be much more likely to re-elect a lawmaker who fights for their share of federal funds for education (50 percent), supports providing more early childhood programs (49 percent), and protects education budgets from cuts (44 percent).

The Value of Teaching

Americans believe teachers are the key to improving school performance and that we need to improve the power, pay, prestige, and preparation of this most essential profession. Raising teacher quality outpolls every other approach to improving education. By a nearly 2-to-1 margin, raising teacher quality (27 percent) tops support for initiatives to raise student achievement in low-performing schools (12 percent), ensure that all students can read by the fourth grade (14 percent), and reduce class size (15 percent). Teacher quality outpolls efforts to ensure all schools have funding to meet state requirements for high student achievement by a 3-to-1 margin, and is favored over efforts to provide parents with taxpayer money to allow their child to leave a failing school by a 9-to-1 margin.

Top Priorities for Improvement



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A significant majority of voters (59 percent) believe that it is possible to have a qualified teacher in every classroom by the year 2005. They note that low teacher salaries (39 percent) present the biggest obstacle to achieving this goal.

To improve teacher quality, virtually all voters (94 percent) believe states should require all middle and high school teachers to have a degree in the subject they teach. Nearly eight in 10 (78 percent) respondents support efforts to encourage individuals from other fields to enter teaching by alternative routes and more than two-thirds (68 percent) believe states should implement signing and retention bonuses and other incentives for teachers, even if these programs require tax increases.

The public wants all children to have access to high-quality teachers and does not believe that the best teachers should be assigned to high poverty and minority schools. Some 82 percent of voters say that high quality teachers should be distributed equally among all schools, while 13 percent say they should be assigned to the most disadvantaged schools.

Public Education Network recently launched www.GiveKidsGoodSchools.com to enable individuals to support and demand high-quality public education for all children in America. The Web site provides voters with valuable information about public education issues and allows constituents to contact their lawmakers to communicate their views on improving the pay, power, prestige, and preparation of teachers and other key priorities for strengthening public education.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Methodology

This national public opinion poll of 1,050 voting-age Americans was conducted by the polling firm Lake Snell Perry & Associates, Inc. during the week of January 22-28, 2003. The report, which includes analysis of a base of 800 male and female voters with an oversample of 125 registered African Americans and 125 registered Latino voters, also includes information from three focus groups of African Americans, Latinos, and whites, with and without children. The margin of error is +/- 3.5 percent. Some questions were split sampled. Tables and charts may not total 100 percent due to rounding. Detailed report findings will be available in PDF format on the PEN website at www.publiceducation.org.

Acknowledgments

Public Education Network Coordinators
Arnold Fege, Andrew Smith

Education Week Coordinators
Virginia B. Edwards, Mary-Ellen Phelps Deily

Polling and Focus Groups
Lake Snell Perry & Associates, Inc.

Editorial, Design, Outreach
CommunicationWorks, L.L.C.

Additional copies of the report
and more detailed findings
are available from
Public Education Network.

PUBLIC EDUCATION NETWORK

Public Involvement • Public Education • Public Benefit

Public Education Network
601 Thirteenth Street NW
Suite 900 North
Washington DC 20005-3808
Phone: 202-628-7460
Fax: 202-628-1893
www.PublicEducation.org

EDUCATION WEEK
American Education's Newspaper of Record

Education Week
6935 Arlington Road
Suite 100
Bethesda, MD 20814-5233
Phone: 301-280-3100
Fax: 301-280-3200
www.edweek.org

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

REPRODUCTION BASIS

☑ This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket) form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.

☐ This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").